

Orthograph

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Orlando White (Dinè) has a “fascination for letters”¹ strong enough to write a collection of poems themed around their personification, “LETTERS” (*sic*). The poems within are dense – full of esoteric words strung together in ways that are, I suspect, deliberately obtuse. Here, I tangle myself up in White’s vocabulary by reading his poems in context of each other. White proposes that we remake ourselves through our orthography – that the process of linguistic composition is not only representational but reproductive. The page on which one writes becomes an extension of theirself. Though irrevocably severed from the biological body with which a subject more immediately identifies, one’s written identity formed on and with the mediating page was always already a part of what it means to be.

The title of “LIMN”² is a verb, now archaic, which can mean either “To illuminate (letters, manuscripts, books)”³; to “adorn or embellish with gold or bright color”; or “to portray, depict (a subject),” especially with paint³. White seems to combine these meanings in “LIMN”:

“And when a circle in thought functions only as an \
idea, notarized into paper, it becomes a gradation of \
pigments, an absent measure of thought, an outline of \
the color white.”⁴

The letter ‘O’ is White’s subject, which when depicted becomes a gilding of the page itself – “an outline of \ the color white.” That the ‘O’ is not a discrete unit but a “gradation of pigments” underlines that ink and paper are literally not black-and-white; instead, orthography “adorn[s] or embellish[es]” the paper on which it is inscribed with “bright color.”

This is part of White’s broader project to de-naturalize the page itself, beginning with

1 White in Harjo 2020, 336.

2 White 2015, 45.

3 *OED* 1971, 1628.

4 White 2015, 45.

“NASCENT.” It is easy to think of a blank piece of paper as “‘no one’s land,’ a territory supposedly empty of human habitation and prior claims,”⁵ but this is not so. The page is not “*terra nullius*”⁶ and to write is not colonial. For White, the page is not simply inert but a “leaf mirror \ of white and hush,” which reflects the self during composition.⁷ In particular, “the word *I*, \ a reflection of the mind” changes its function when written on a page: “To say it means \ to practice immediacy but to write \ it means to construct perpetuity.”⁸ Both the page and one’s voice are representational media. The root word of ‘immediate’ is ‘mediate,’ modified by the prefix ‘im-’, another form of ‘in-.’ This prefix can produce two diametrically opposed meanings. In words like ‘impossible’ and ‘intolerable,’ it negates the root to which it is affixed. But in ‘infamous’ and ‘impassion,’ ‘im-’/‘in-’ intensifies the meaning of the root. As in “LIMN,” the meanings of this prefix collapse into each other in “NASCENT”: there is no intervening medium between the author and the page, because the page itself is an extension of the medium in which the author exists. An author “construct[s] perpetuity”⁹ for themselves by writing ‘I’ on the page, thereby extending their identity into the external medium of the page. The page captures our being when we allow it to reflect us.

Media like paper offer persistence beyond the body one was born with. White sometimes subtly translates Navajo words for the reader: “... procreation to circumflex: *Díí*, these pitches of stress...” and “Ictus of ‘*iiná*’ inside where *person* \ ticks in utero....”¹⁰ Indeed, Wall and Morgan’s beginner Navajo-English dictionary translates “*díí*” to “this; these” and “‘*iiná*” to “life.”¹¹

White’s “Pronunciation marks” – the diacritics over ‘i’ and ‘a’ – “are proof \ of one’s own

5 Justice 2018, 10.

6 *Ibid.*

7 White 2015, 18-19.

8 *Ibid.*: 19.

9 *Ibid.*

10 White 2015, 13.

11 Morgan & Wall 1958; 29, 37.

cultural sentence”¹² and thereby work to keep alive both the Navajo language and through it White’s own self.

Even absent written forms, though, language exists in “breath” and changes our “soma” – the Latin root for ‘body.’¹³ This is a different kind of immediacy: the self is ephemeral, not perpetual. In the pre-written space, “*person* \ ticks in utero [large space] like *tó* [large space] rippling skin,” forming with every “vowel stress” and “nasal enunciation” which White calls “the tenors of existence”¹⁴ (italicization *sic*). The Navajo word ‘tó’ translates to English “water.”¹⁵ Therefore, White is likening the human body itself to water. During speech the speaker has metaphorically “rippling skin”¹⁶ because by voicing words they change themselves. Our linguistic breath causes our form to ripple like a breeze ripples the surface of a lake; what we say changes us.

Letters, too, participate in this continual re-making of identity, both as subjects and as mediate extensions of the author. White reshapes the letter “e” through personification into a priest: “on knee to bow, a human figure, ... He [the letter ‘e’] wears what appears to be a black shirt and white clerical collar.”¹⁷ The shape of ‘e’ suggests a kneeling figure facing left, and its “outline of \ the color white”¹⁸ looks similar in that context to the band of white on a priest’s collar. White likens writing ‘e’ to the practice of confession, in that “we trust him [the letter ‘e’] with our thoughts.”¹⁹ A writer’s thoughts become the meaningful content of the words they spell, and so “letters commit our sins” by taking on our confessed meanings which “redeem[s] us from

12 White 2015, 17.

13 *Ibid*, 13.

14 *Ibid*.

15 Morgan & Wall 1958, 59.

16 White 2015, 13.

17 *Ibid*, 31.

18 *Ibid*, 45.

19 *Ibid*, 31

print.”²⁰ And in that process, the letters necessarily change. They literally come to mean differently in different contexts, and even their shape changes over time: “how does a letter become another when its origin is lost? It develops by always being written.”²¹ Letters’ forms, like peoples’, are fluid.

White’s conception of human and letter identity – living and evolving – carries with it the tension of inevitable death. White explicitly acknowledges that “People write and change,” as the preceding poems have established, “but language when written might not.”²² In this case, White is concerned with specific letters, not the abstract orthographic templates on which the physical letters we produce are based. These actualized forms gloss to a reader as stable but are ever-degrading; written letters, though producing some “perpetuity,”²³ still have a “lifespan.”²⁴ To “Write, means to \ place life \ into book,”²⁵ but “how long as surface phenomena will it be print?”²⁶ – how long do letters have to live? If one were to “Rip vertebral column from *q* \ snap the ribs off *x* \ from its ink skin pull out the skull of *e*,” there would be nothing left of the meaning which the author confessionally invested in these letters because “The persistence of composition means \ nothing without the shapes of letters.”²⁷

Lest the reader find themselves overly sentimental about the letters themselves, here it is important to recognize that orthography was never whole – never consistent. The ‘ortho-’ in ‘orthography’ literally means “straight, right” in either a “physical” or “ethical” sense,²⁸ as in ‘orthodoxy.’ The letters we use come from without, and are often forcefully imposed. Our ability

20 *Ibid.*

21 White 2015, 33

22 *Ibid.*, 51.

23 *Ibid.*, 19.

24 *Ibid.*, 51.

25 *Ibid.*, 54.

26 *Ibid.*, 51.

27 *Ibid.*, 77.

28 *OED* 1971, 2012.

to transmute them is freedom of expression only within the narrow confines of what acceptably constitutes “Alphabet.”²⁹ As a child learning English, White was “more interested in the image of a letter on a flash card” – how “language [is] separate from its form” – than in the linguistic system which letters ostensibly exist to enable.³⁰ As White’s poetry implicitly shows, there is no one correct way to write or use a letter; language is what we make of it. Because it reciprocally composes our beings, we are in fact obliged to change in language what is insufficient for our representations.

Acknowledging and accepting the responsibility of new composition is the leap from representation to reproduction. The empty set, for which one of White’s poems is named, is a mathematical concept in set theory. Sets contain elements, for example $A = \{1, 2, 3\}$ or $B = \{q, 8, \alpha\}$, and the empty set predictably has no elements: $\emptyset = \{\}$. Even in this orthographic form supposed to represent absence itself, its “Curly brackets enclose sibilant: an *s*, phonetic infection” — there is something “alive within empty set” (*sic*).³¹ The act of placing pen to paper sets in motion “the ink’s flagella zig-zag” as it “skirr[s] towards page ovum \ to perforate its egg coat \ fecundate the nucleus of this \ sheet,”³² which “evolves \ into written fungic.”³³ “Fecundate” means “to render fruitful or productive,” where its root (‘fecund’) is synonymous with “prolific” and “fertile.”³⁴ Its presence here contributes to the allegory between written and biological reproduction. The life of a letter is not only on the page which im-mediate it, but also in the minds of those who read it. Letters spread.

And we spread them. We get to choose a part of the meaning that letters carry. We

29 White in Harjo 2020, 335.

30 White in Harjo 2020, 335.

31 White 2015, 60.

32 *Ibid*, 14.

33 *Ibid*, 60.

34 *OED* 1971, 976.

choose the letters that we produce, and which take hold in ourselves. Although our orthography is imposed from without, we inevitably make it our own when we write and speak. It is in some ways a burden, and in others a blessing. Authorial power is essential to 'iiná.

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